



Stefano Summo for ProPublica

Criminal Justice

Gangsters, Money and Murder: How Chinese Organized Crime Is Dominating America's Illegal Marijuana Market

A quadruple murder in Oklahoma shows how the Chinese underworld has come to dominate the booming illicit trade, fortifying its rise as a global powerhouse with alleged ties to China's authoritarian regime.

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It seemed an unlikely spot for a showdown between Chinese gangsters: a marijuana farm on the prairie in Kingfisher County, Oklahoma.

On a Sunday evening in late November 2022, a blue Toyota Corolla sped down a dirt-and-gravel road in the twilight, passing hay meadows and columns of giant wind turbines spinning on the horizon. The Corolla braked and turned, headlights sweeping across prairie grass, and entered the driveway of a 10-acre compound filled with circular huts and row after row of greenhouses. Past a ranch house, the sedan stopped outside a large detached garage.

The driver, Chen Wu, burst out of the car with a 9 mm pistol in his hand. Balding and muscular, he had worked at the farm and invested in the illegal marijuana operation.

Charging into the garage, Wu confronted the five men and one woman working inside. Like him, they were immigrants from China. Piles of marijuana leaves cluttered the brightly lit room, covering a table and stuffed into plastic bins and cardboard boxes.



Stacks and boxes of marijuana fill the garage where four people were shot to death on a farm, shown in a still image from a sheriff's deputy's bodycam video. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

Wu aimed his gun at He Qiang Chen, a 56-year-old ex-convict known at the farm as “the Boss.” Chen had a temper; he was awaiting trial in the beating and shooting of a man two years earlier at a Chinese community center in Oklahoma City.

Before Chen could make a move, Wu shot him in the right knee. The boss fell to the floor, writhing in pain.

Wu held the others at gunpoint. He said Chen owed him \$300,000 and told his hostages they had half an hour to get him the money.

If they didn't, he said, he would kill them all.

Both the shooter and his victim were from Fujian, a coastal province known for mafias, immigration and corruption. They had come to America and joined a wave of new players rushing into the nation's billion-dollar marijuana boom: Chinese mobsters who roam from state to state, harvesting drugs and cash and overwhelming law enforcement with their resources and elusiveness.

Now, their itinerant odysseys had collided in this remote outpost in the heartland. The clash left four people dead and unveiled an international underworld of dangerous dimensions.

Wild West

The bloodshed in Kingfisher County made national headlines, highlighting Oklahoma's role as the latest and wildest frontier in the marijuana underworld.

From California to Maine, Chinese organized crime has come to dominate much of the nation's illicit marijuana trade, an investigation by ProPublica and The Frontier has found. Along with the explosive growth of this criminal industry, the gangsters have unleashed lawlessness: violence, drug trafficking, money laundering, gambling, bribery, document fraud, bank fraud, environmental damage and theft of water and electricity.

Chinese organized crime “has taken over marijuana in Oklahoma and the United States,” said Donnie Anderson, the director of the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, in an interview.

Among the victims are thousands of Chinese immigrants, many of them smuggled across the Mexican border to toil in often abusive conditions at farms ringed by fences, surveillance cameras and guards with guns and machetes. A grim offshoot of this indentured servitude: Traffickers force Chinese immigrant women into prostitution for the bosses of the agricultural workforce.

The mobsters operate in a loose but disciplined confederation overseen from New York by mafias rooted in southern China, according to state and federal officials. Known as “triads” because of an emblem used long ago by secret societies, these criminal groups wield power at home and throughout the diaspora and allegedly maintain an alliance with the Chinese state.

In 2018, the mafias set their sights on Oklahoma when the state's voters approved a ballot measure that legalized the cultivation and sale of marijuana for medicinal purposes. The law did not limit the number of dispensaries or growing operations – known in the industry simply as “grows.” It requires marijuana businesses to have majority owners who have lived in the state for two years, and it bars shipping the product across state lines. But limited enforcement enabled out-of-state investors to recruit illegal “straw owners” and to traffic weed clandestinely across the country. And land was cheap. In this wide-open atmosphere, the industry grew at breakneck speed and, regulators say, is now second only to the oil and gas industry in the state.

Since Colorado became the first state to legalize marijuana for personal use in 2012, a patchwork of marijuana-related legislation has developed across the country. State authorities generally require licenses and put limits on cultivation, and federal law prohibits interstate sales. But steep taxes on legal products and gaps and differences in laws across states have created the conditions for a massive black market to thrive.



A body-camera image shows a law enforcement officer responding to the murders at the marijuana farm. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

Oklahoma has quickly become a top supplier of illicit weed. Although street prices fluctuate and calculating the value of a black market is complex, officials estimate the value of the illegal marijuana grown in the state at somewhere between \$18 billion and \$44 billion a year. State investigators have found links between foreign mafias and over 3,000 illegal grows — and they say that more than 80% of the criminal groups are of Chinese origin.

The federal response, however, has been muted. With the spread of legalization and decriminalization, enforcement has become a low priority for the U.S. Department of Justice, anti-drug veterans say.

“The challenge we are having is a lack of interest by federal prosecutors to charge illicit marijuana cases,” said Ray Donovan, the former chief of operations of the Drug Enforcement Administration. “They don’t realize all the implications. Marijuana causes so much crime at the local level, gun violence in particular. The same groups selling thousands of pounds of marijuana are also laundering millions of dollars of fentanyl money. It’s not just one-dimensional.”

The expansion into the cannabis market is propelling the rise of Chinese organized crime as a global powerhouse, current and former national security officials say. During the past decade, Chinese mafias became the dominant money launderers for Latin American cartels dealing narcotics including fentanyl, which has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. The huge revenue stream from marijuana fuels that laundering apparatus, which is “the most extensive network of underground banking in the world,” said a former senior DEA official, Donald Im.

“The profits from the marijuana trade allow the Chinese organized criminal networks to expand their underground global banking system for cartels and other criminal organizations,” said Im, who was an architect of the DEA’s fight against Chinese organized crime.

U.S. law enforcement struggles to respond to this multifaceted threat. State and federal agencies suffer from a lack of personnel who know Chinese language and culture well enough to investigate complex cases, infiltrate networks or translate intercepts, current and former officials say. A federal shift of priorities to counterterrorism after 2001 meant resources dedicated to Chinese organized crime dwindled — while the power of the underworld grew.

And the shadow of the Chinese state hovers over it all. As ProPublica has reported, the authoritarian regime and the mafias allegedly maintain an alliance that benefits both sides. In exchange for government protection, Chinese mobsters deliver services such as illegally moving money overseas for the Communist Party elite and helping to spy on and intimidate Chinese immigrant communities, according to Western national security officials, case files, Chinese dissidents and human rights groups.

Because China has emerged as the top geopolitical rival of the United States, carrying out brazen espionage and influence activities in this country, the spread of Chinese mafias in Oklahoma and elsewhere also poses a potential national security threat, state and federal officials say.

Leaders of Chinese cultural associations in Oklahoma and other states are allegedly connected to both the illegal marijuana trade and to Chinese government officials, ProPublica and The Frontier have found. A number of influential leaders have been charged with or convicted of crimes ranging from drug offenses to witness intimidation. (A second part of this series further explores that issue.)

“You’d be very naive to sit and say the Chinese state doesn’t know what Chinese organized crime is doing in the U.S.,” Anderson said, “or that there is not a connection between the Chinese state and organized crime.”

In February, 50 U.S. legislators wrote to Attorney General Merrick Garland expressing concern that Chinese nationals, “including those with potential ties to the Chinese Communist Party,” are “reportedly operating thousands of illicit marijuana farms across the country.”

The bipartisan group of lawmakers, who included all but two members of Oklahoma’s congressional delegation, asked whether federal authorities are investigating CCP connections to the marijuana underworld and how much illicit revenue returns to China.

The Department of Justice plans to respond to the questions raised by the legislators, a department spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

“The Department is working on developing a marijuana enforcement policy that will be consistent” with federal guidance related to state legalization initiatives, said the spokesperson, Peter Carr. “Among the federal enforcement priorities under that policy is preventing the revenue from the illegal distribution of marijuana from going to criminal enterprises, gangs, and cartels.”

The department declined to comment about other issues raised in this story.

In response to a list of questions, a spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., said in an emailed statement that he was “not aware of the specifics” related to Chinese organized crime in the marijuana industry. But the spokesperson, Liu Pengyu, said China wages a determined fight against drugs, the “common enemy of mankind.”

“We always ask our fellow citizens to observe local laws and regulations and refrain from engaging in any illegal or criminal activities while they are abroad,” Liu said in the written statement. “The Chinese government is steadfast on fighting drug crimes, playing an active part in international anti-drug cooperation, and resolving the drug issue with other countries including the US in an active and responsible attitude.”

ProPublica and The Frontier interviewed more than three dozen current and former law enforcement officials in the United States and overseas, as well as academic experts, defense lawyers, farmworkers, Chinese dissidents, Chinese-American leaders, human rights advocates and others. Some sources were granted anonymity to protect their safety or because they were not authorized to speak to the media. Reporters reviewed thousands of pages of court files, government reports, news reports and social media posts in English, Chinese and other languages.



Stefano Summo for ProPublica

California Dreams

He Qiang Chen came to New York about 30 years ago from the Changle district outside Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian.

Chen and his older brother opened a restaurant and a laundry in the Bronx and became legal U.S. residents. By the early 2000s, they had moved to North Carolina, where they also ran restaurants, according to public records and law enforcement officials. They shuttled back and forth to New York, buying properties in and around Flushing, which has a vibrant Chinese business district. The area has also developed a reputation as a bastion of Chinese crime bosses with nationwide reach, leading to a refrain in law enforcement: “All roads lead to Flushing.”

Until about five years ago, public records indicate that Chen’s encounters with the justice system consisted of repeated tickets for speeding and reckless driving.

In 2017, though, the brothers launched into the marijuana racket at a level that would make investigators think they’d been involved in crime for a while. They went to California, where Chen paid \$825,000 for a four-bedroom house behind a wrought-iron gate in the San Joaquin Valley about 35 miles from Sacramento.

The semirural lot was near a winery and an equestrian center. But Chen wasn’t interested in genteel pastimes. Along with his romantic companion, a 43-year-old woman from San Francisco named Fang Hui Lee, Chen and his brother got to work converting the spacious barn into a cannabis plantation.

Several associates also established themselves in the Sacramento area. A 39-year-old fellow transplant from North Carolina, Yifei Lin, bought a suburban house and set up a clandestine indoor grow, court records show.

The cross-country move was part of a migration of criminal groups into the marijuana industry. Other destinations included Colorado and the Pacific Northwest. California law limited cannabis for personal use to six plants and required commercial growers to get a license. With criminal penalties diminishing, the goals of legalization were to establish regulation, generate tax revenue and eliminate organized crime from the picture.

Instead, the low risk and fast money set off a feeding frenzy. The players who established clandestine grows included Mexican cartels, Cuban immigrant gangs and longtime locals. But the Chinese crews were the biggest and best organized. They smuggled their product by car, truck and plane to the East Coast, where profit margins were stratospheric.

In this rapacious subculture, mobsters went into subdivisions and snapped up a half dozen homes at a time. In San Bernardino County, east of Los Angeles, a federal court convicted a real estate agent in 2020 for a typical tactic: paying “ghost owners” to fly in from China posing as buyers, sign paperwork and go home, according to case files and interviews.

The bosses brought in recent Chinese immigrants to tend indoor crops, often stealing industrial quantities of water and power from public utility systems for their operations. Grow houses created a nefarious mix of risks: toxic fumes from banned pesticides, deadly fires from makeshift electrical bypasses, volatile chemicals and flammable equipment. The presence of drugs, cash and weapons was a magnet for crime, and the blighted homes hurt property values.

In November 2018, Sgt. George Negrete, a detective for the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Office, got a tip about Chen's illegal grow.

Doing surveillance on foot from an adjacent water treatment facility, Negrete saw telltale signs, such as spray foam filling the seams of the barn walls to mask heat, light and odor. Utility records showed that the electric bill had spiked from \$170 a month to more than \$2,000 per month after Chen bought the property, indicating sustained use of air conditioning and high-intensity lights.

On Dec. 13, deputies served a search warrant. They found 3,835 plants and arrested the Chen brothers, Lee and two other men, court documents say. Chen claimed he didn't speak English. But he admitted he was in charge. He told Negrete that someone had advised him marijuana was a good business.

“They weren't scared or afraid,” Negrete said in an interview. “It was like regular business for them.”

The crew had slept on mattresses on the floor. Lee apparently supervised the day-to-day work. And deputies found two .40-caliber pistols, court documents say. Firearms were unusual at Chinese-run grows that Negrete had raided.

“It made me think they were at a higher scale in an organization,” the detective said.

Cash and Discipline

The arrests of the Chens and their associates happened during a state-federal crackdown in the Sacramento area known as Operation Lights Out.

On the day of the raid on Chen's house, federal prosecutors indicted a Sacramento real estate broker, accusing her and other suspects of teaming with financiers in Fujian who wired millions of dollars to acquire houses for indoor grows through fraudulent maneuvers, according to a criminal complaint. Authorities also seized more than 100 houses.

The elaborate and brazen nature of the alleged conspiracy led investigators to believe it involved the triads, according to three former federal officials who declined to be named because they were not authorized to discuss the case.

Suspects used banks in China to wire money to the U.S. defendants in suspicious and obvious increments, according to the criminal complaint and former federal officials. Yet there was no interference from the most powerful police state in the world. Although hard proof was elusive, two former senior U.S. officials told ProPublica they suspected Chinese officials protected the scheme and may have benefited from it financially.

“There was no question in my mind that there was at least Chinese government awareness of this,” a former senior Department of Justice official said. “There was no way they didn't see the movement of the money going to the same people in the United States. But could we prove it? We suspected Chinese officials were complicit.”

Although the prosecution had a big impact by combining the might of the FBI, DEA, IRS and Homeland Security Investigations, it was one of the few federal offensives against Chinese networks involved in marijuana.

Still, DEA financial investigations around the country revealed that the emerging marijuana empire intersected with the networks laundering billions of dollars for Latin American drug lords. Some of the funds from the laundering returned to China, but a lot was reinvested into new U.S. marijuana ventures, current and former officials said.

The marijuana proceeds were “another massive bucket of money” with which high-level Chinese crime bosses funded interconnected rackets such as the money laundering and migrant smuggling, said former senior DEA official Christopher Urben, who is now a managing partner at the global investigations firm Nardello & Co.

Agents marveled at the scope of the enterprise and the lack of turf wars. Around 2019, the DEA learned that triad bosses had traveled from China to sit-downs in New York, where they issued directives and kept the peace nationwide, according to Urben and other current and former officials. New York had become the command hub for marijuana as well as money laundering.

“The discipline involved is incredible,” Urben said. “How are we having thousands of workers moved into the country and among states? How are all these groups doing this without more conflict or violence? How do you ensure that all these mid-level managers get along, with all this money, all this marijuana? The only way you can do it is with an organized crime apparatus.”

In the federal prosecution in Sacramento, a defendant pleaded guilty this Feb. 27. The real estate broker and two others are still awaiting trial.

Meanwhile, Chen and his associates pleaded no contest to misdemeanors in state courts, which sentenced them to probation. Wasting no time, the crew headed for Oklahoma in 2020.

In contrast to California, Oklahoma did not limit the size of grows. As long as the operations had a nominal local owner and a medical marijuana license, they could spread dozens of greenhouses capable of holding tens of thousands of plants over a cheap parcel of farmland.

Some Chinese groups redeployed by air, according to officials and case files. Federal agents began detecting flights of private planes from California to rural airfields in Oklahoma. Couriers aboard the aircraft carried hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash to buy farmland, sometimes for twice or three times its value. To dodge federal interdiction teams, some pilots filed flight plans for one airstrip, then diverted to another.

And money poured in from China. Around 2020, one group crowdfunded Oklahoma marijuana ventures through an invitation to investors on WeChat, the popular Chinese social media platform, said Mark Woodward, spokesperson of the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics. U.S. investigations show that WeChat, although heavily monitored by Chinese security forces, is often a forum for discussions of criminal activity.

Oklahoma's marijuana industry surged to "an astronomical level," said Ray Padilla, a Denver-based DEA agent. He estimated that 90% of Colorado's illicit producers moved to the neighboring state.

Oklahoma was the new frontier, Padilla said. And it was "absolute insanity."

Gunplay at the Association

A statue of a panda bear sits like a chunky sentry atop a pillar on Classen Boulevard in Oklahoma City's Asian District.

Mixing a longtime Vietnamese community with a more recent Chinese one, the boulevard is lined with stores, restaurants, massage parlors, nail salons and, block after block, marijuana dispensaries.

Behind the panda, a ground-floor suite in a corner mini-mall houses the local chapter of the American Fujian Association.

Shortly before dusk on Dec. 8, 2020, a black Mercedes SUV carrying Chen and Lin pulled up at the mini-mall accompanied by two other cars. The crew had driven an hour from their new farm in Kingfisher County. They were looking for Jintao Liu, who had also relocated from Sacramento after his marijuana site got busted, court documents show. Liu and Chen had been feuding since Chen had failed to pay him for organizing a delivery from California.

When Liu had asked him to pay the \$2,000 debt, Chen had become infuriated and began to terrorize Liu and his wife with threatening phone calls and texts showing photos of guns. Chen squared off with Liu at a gathering and punched him in the jaw. Later, Chen threatened to kill his wife and three children, court records say.

The reasons for the rage remain somewhat murky. Asked during a court hearing why Chen was so angry if he owed the money, not the other way around, Liu answered, "He did not want to pay. He was this kind of a person."

On the afternoon that Chen and his crew appeared outside the Fujianese association, Liu was inside watching a friend play cards, according to court testimony. Liu and several other men came out. A brawl ensued.

"Shoot him," Chen told Lin, according to witnesses.

Lin pulled a gun and fired, the bullet fracturing Liu's hipbone, according to court documents.

Police soon arrested Chen and Lin. A search of Chen's house in suburban Edmond turned up three pistols, 27.5 pounds of marijuana, \$97,000 in cash and eight vials of ketamine, the party drug of choice in the Chinese underworld, court records say.

Prosecutors charged Chen and Lin with assault and battery with a deadly weapon and drug offenses. The men made bail and went right back to the grow. (Lin has pleaded not guilty. His lawyer declined to comment.)



An Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics agent searches for witnesses and survivors at the Kingfisher County farm where four people were shot to death. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

Their farm was about 13 miles from Hennessey, population 2,000. Lin had bought the 10-acre spread for \$280,000, court documents say. To evade a state residency law, he paid cash to a local man named Richard Ignacio to pose as the 75% owner of the medical marijuana business and obtain a license, court documents allege. Ignacio had allegedly been drafted as a straw owner by an Oklahoma City

accountant, a 20-time felon named Kevin Pham, who has been charged in connection with the Kingfisher farm and other grows, court documents say. Ignacio told investigators that he “earned significant income” acting as a hired front man.

Ignacio pleaded guilty last year to being a straw owner for the Kingfisher farm. He and Pham have pleaded not guilty to other charges and are awaiting trial. They could not be reached for comment.

Lin lived at and managed the place for Chen, according to court records and interviews. For equipment, three companies in China shipped about 440,000 pounds of greenhouse parts. Even among the vast marijuana farms in Oklahoma, the spread was unusually large: it contained over 100 greenhouses and several indoor grow houses, interviews and satellite images show.

The closest neighbor, Gary Hawk, lived about a mile away. He had grown up at the place next door when it was a dairy farm owned by his parents. There was tension with the newcomers from the start. After a neighboring farmer used a plane for crop dusting, men at Chen's farm threatened to shoot it out of the sky, Hawk said in an interview.

“The mail carrier would go by and she would stop to deliver mail there,” he said. “They would come out of the house and one guy would come out with a machete and one guy would come out with an AR-15. That was just to pick up the mail.”

The farm employed an armed security officer stationed in a guard hut and as many as two dozen laborers, according to law enforcement officials and others who spent time there. Workers slept in trailers, the garage or the cluttered main house, where meals were prepared throughout the day and there was only one bathroom. During an inspection by fire marshals that found multiple safety violations in 2021, most of the employees presented Chinese identification and U.S. immigration documents.

Neighbors complained about uncollected trash blowing into nearby pastures and endangering cattle, said Sgt. Michael Shults of the Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department.

“We've been out there several times explaining to them you need to put trash up,” Shults said in an interview. “Cattle get into plastics that are blowing around, you know, cattle will eat almost anything.”

Deputies soon became convinced that Chen's crew, like many others, was trafficking its product on the black market in other states. In April 2021, Shults and other deputies intercepted a vehicle carrying 46.8 pounds of marijuana and arrested the driver, who was from Texas and did not have an Oklahoma cannabis transport license. Surveillance showed that she was one of two suspected couriers who had picked up bales at the farm that day, according to Shults and court documents.

Awash in Weed

By 2021, a mysterious investor had joined the crew at the Kingfisher farm.

Chen Wu (also known as Wu Chen, but not related to the brothers) was in his mid-40s and from Fujian, according to officials and Chinese media reports. There are gaps in his past that investigators are still trying to fill. What they do know suggests he was a heavyweight: He had ties to Chinese criminal networks involved in money laundering, drug trafficking and migrant smuggling across the country and overseas, according to officials and court records.

As a young man, Wu lived illegally in Spain, whose Chinese population has grown rapidly in the past two decades. In 2000, police on the resort island of Mallorca arrested him for entering the country illegally, Spanish law enforcement officials said.

As often happens, though, he managed to stay. He sought work authorization in 2003 and gave an address in a gritty neighborhood of Madrid. Five years later, he got in trouble for using someone else's identity, officials said, and Spanish police issued an arrest warrant for him in 2010.

But he had already moved on. Wu spent time in the Caribbean, including Cuba. Arriving in the United States around 2016, he bounced around the country pursuing illicit schemes, officials said. In Minnesota, he married the owner of a restaurant and got legal status. During his divorce in 2020, Wu claimed in legal filings to have only about \$18,000 to his name, records show.

Yet he moved to Oklahoma and invested in Chen's farm. After months working there, he argued with his partners over money and left.

By then, the state was awash in weed.



Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics agents and Kingfisher County deputies search through buildings on the 10-acre marijuana farm. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

The number of licensed marijuana grows in Oklahoma peaked at nearly 10,000 at the end of 2021. Authorities suspected most of them of trafficking on the black market. One Chinese criminal group oversaw at least 400 grows. Another outfit smuggled truckloads to the East Coast every week, selling each for over \$20 million, before investigators dismantled it.

Whether bosses or grunts, most of the newcomers were from New York, where a mob hierarchy oversees the illicit marijuana trade in Oklahoma and swoops in to collect the profits, according to law enforcement officials and court files.

"You have many different levels," said Anderson, the state anti-drug director. "Some overseeing grows. Then another upper echelon that controls money. ... They're never around except to collect money."

The boom caused prices to crater, hurting the legal industry. And it brought a generalized surge of crime. At airports, wary-looking Chinese immigrant laborers with backpacks became a familiar sight to law enforcement officers. So did human traffickers accompanying flashily dressed prostitutes to brothels set up for overseers of the marijuana farms. Illegal casinos appeared, seizures of ketamine soared, and robberies and violence plagued grows, dispensaries and stash houses, according to court cases and law enforcement officials.

There was complex criminality as well. In a case investigated by the FBI, a Chinese ring based in New York and Oklahoma allegedly used a cryptocurrency scheme to steal over \$10 million from banks and other financial institutions. One defendant, who is now awaiting trial, was involved in a marijuana grow with an associate of Chen's Kingfisher County crew, according to law enforcement officials and public records.

The victims of another scam were law-abiding Asian Americans. Cybercriminals manipulated the computer system of the Texas Department of Public Safety to obtain thousands of driver's licenses destined for Asian Americans, tricking authorities into mailing the licenses to marijuana farms in neighboring Oklahoma. The suspects used the licenses for fraudulent purchases or sold them on the underground market. Police arrested the accused mastermind in New York and extradited him to Texas last April to stand trial.

Before marijuana legalization, Oklahoma was "a pretty quiet state," said Tony Lie, president of the Oklahoma Chinese Association. "We didn't have any Chinese criminal gangs coming here."

Lie has lived in Oklahoma for more than 30 years. Members of his longtime organization come from several regions in mainland China as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. In contrast, most of the newcomers are Fujianese. Lie said the ills of the marijuana industry have hurt the image of Chinese Americans in the state.

"We don't want people to come to Oklahoma to do something bad for the Chinese community," Lie said.

The shooting at the Fujianese association in 2020 had opened a window into a fast-evolving underworld.

But it turned out to be just a prelude.

Pitch-Black Night

Shortly before 8 p.m. on Nov. 20, 2022, Kingfisher County Sheriff Dennis Banther alerted his deputies to a hostage incident at a farm near Hennessey.

"Everybody go 10-8," the text message said: Go in service and rush to the scene.

Shults was the third to arrive. Four gunshot victims lay dead in the garage, and the shooter was on the loose. Deputies feared he was hiding in the sprawl of agricultural buildings known as hoop-houses.

"It was pitch black," Shults said. "When you're out there in the pitch dark, in the black night, and you've got four people down, been executed, and you don't know if the shooter's still on scene or not ... it's find the shooter. Survival."



Kingfisher County deputies discovered the bodies of four victims among stacks of marijuana in the garage. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

The sergeant came upon a wounded man lying in a black Ford F-150 pickup truck. It was Lin, the farm manager who had been the accused gunman at the Fujianese association, according to court documents.

A second survivor emerged from the darkness. A deputy struggled to ask the farmworker urgent questions using Google Translate on his phone. Deputies found another worker who had recorded part of the incident on a cellphone, leaving it near the garage with the camera on before fleeing, according to court documents and interviews.

The survivors said the killer was Wu, who had worked at the farm until about a year earlier. He had arrived in his Toyota Corolla and shot Chen and a dog that was in the garage. Wu then told his hostages he would kill them if they didn't hand over \$300,000 in half an hour.

"The Boss told his girlfriend, who was inside the garage at the time, to call her brother to get the money," a witness told police.

As minutes passed, Wu became increasingly agitated. The hostages tried to stop Chen's bleeding by wrapping a long-sleeved shirt around his knee as a makeshift tourniquet.

But Chen "was not doing very well," the witness said. In a grim exchange, the wounded boss told the gunman "to finish him off."

Wu pumped two bullets into Chen's chest. Then, two hostages rushed at the gunman, who let loose a barrage that killed Chen's brother, Chen's girlfriend Lee and a newly hired employee. The wounded Lin ran outside and took refuge in the truck.

Although the phone video didn't capture the actual shooting, it recorded the sound of gunshots and showed the gunman leaving the garage.

Emergency personnel swarmed the scene. A helicopter evacuated the wounded man. Deputies spent all night doing a sweep of the grounds, finding another terrified worker hiding in a barn.

At one point, a sedan with New York plates pulled up to the farm. An Asian man rolled down the window, startling deputies, and said he "was sent" to pick up the workers remaining onsite, a deputy said.

"You need to back him off," a sheriff's lieutenant yelled to his deputies. Afterward, they would wonder who had sent him so quickly.

In one area of the dark compound, deputies thought they were trudging through mud. After sunrise, they realized it was human excrement — a sign of the conditions in which the farmworkers lived.

Meanwhile, the gunman sped east toward Florida. From the road, he called people in Florida, including a Chinese organized crime figure suspected of involvement in drugs and human trafficking, according to court records and law enforcement officials familiar with the case.

Investigators believe Wu wanted help from smugglers to flee the country, possibly to Cuba, which doesn't have an extradition treaty with the U.S., court records say. One affidavit for search warrants for Wu's phones and online accounts seeks evidence "relating to the planning, preparation and actions taken to facilitate human smuggling."

Soon after Wu got to Miami Beach, however, a license plate reader detected his car. Police arrested him two days after the murders. During an extradition hearing, Wu told the judge his life was in danger.

"If I go back to Oklahoma, I'll be killed in the prison or jail," he said through an interpreter. "I'm afraid I will be killed because these people are mafiosos."



Stefano Summo for ProPublica

Aftermath

It seemed ironic: a mass murderer begging the court for protection. But a strange story told by a deputy who brought him back suggests that his fears may have been well founded.

Kingfisher County sheriff's Lt. Ken Thompson had 25 years of experience transporting prisoners. He and another deputy drove nonstop to Florida in a marked Chevrolet Tahoe. In Miami, they checked into a motel near the airport in the evening, planning to sleep a few hours before picking up Wu from the Miami-Dade County jail, Thompson said in an interview.

They changed their minds, Thompson said, because "a weird deal happened."

Looking out of the window of his motel room, Thompson said, he saw a car pull up next to his marked police vehicle in the parking lot. Another car appeared, then a third. The three cars drove around the motel as if doing surveillance, he said.

The deputies concluded that they "didn't really feel comfortable sitting in this place," Thompson said. They decided to take custody of Wu and hit the road.

After the deputies left the jail with Wu in the back seat, the three cars from the motel reappeared, Thompson said, and shadowed the Tahoe on the highway.

Thompson said he did evasive maneuvers to lose them, exiting abruptly and returning to the highway miles later.

"It's just a feeling, a gut feeling that you get, and the fact that they all just kind of just paced right around us," he said. "I mean, they flew right up on us, but then they just locked down to our speed. So it was a weird deal."

Thompson suspects that people in organized crime somehow located the deputies in Miami. He said he did not know if their goal was to harm Wu, to free him or simply to monitor a case that was causing a commotion.

The prisoner was polite and obedient during the cross-country ride, getting out for bathroom breaks and accepting a McDonald's breakfast burrito that the deputies offered him. After they crossed the Oklahoma state line, though, his demeanor changed, the lieutenant said.

"You couldn't pry him out of that car," Thompson said. "Once he reached Oklahoma, he wouldn't get out of the car."

On Feb. 9, Wu pleaded guilty to the four murders and assault and battery. The judge sentenced him to life without possibility of parole. (He declined an interview request.)

The quadruple murder made international headlines and set off a flurry of investigative activity and political attention. A state crackdown has reduced the number of growing operations by almost half, officials say.

Chinese immigrants involved in the marijuana industry say law enforcement has been excessively harsh on them since late 2022. Qiu (Tina) He, who operated a marijuana-related consulting firm that is under investigation, said in an interview that many Asian investors have become disillusioned by what she called discriminatory treatment and the risks of the business. She denied wrongdoing in her case and predicted the state will suffer from the loss of tax revenue if Asian investors leave.

"We are funding Oklahoma," she said. "Oklahoma City will be like a ghost town if we leave."



Law enforcement officers search dozens of metal and plastic marijuana grow houses at the Kingfisher farm the day after the quadruple homicide. Kingfisher County Sheriff's Department

The crime in Kingfisher County was a relatively unusual eruption of violence in the Chinese underworld. Law enforcement experts say the frontier atmosphere in Oklahoma is likely a result of the sheer amount of money generated by the cannabis trade and the number of criminals it has attracted. The growing wealth and power of Chinese organized crime is causing clashes elsewhere in the country as well, experts said.

"Maybe it's more like the Wild West as these groups keep spreading," said Urben, the former DEA official. "You are going to have violence even if someone is controlling from above. I think there would be even more conflict if the triads were not so involved."

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